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THE DEFEAT OF MR. WICKHAM.

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THE DEFEAT OF MR. WICKHAM.

PART I.

The thing was very unpleasant while it lasted. Sometimes even now Talbot wakes up at night all in a sweat, after dreaming that he is in the middle of that final game once more, with an enemy before and a greater enemy behind. But really the thing is over and Mr. Wickham is gone. So the story may well be told, partly in relief because it is finished, and partly as a warning to all those junior masters whom it may concern.

It is quite a modern story. When we reassembled last September, it was found that ping-pong had come to King Alfred's with us, as well as all its necessities and accessories. In a couple of days it was all the rage, and the whole school, from fags to monitors, went in for it with all their hearts. It was not only the chief subject of talk at dinner and tea and supper; but it was strong enough, in some cases, to find its way into the region of our slumbers. Such was the case with my particular chum.

"Say, Hanley," cried Talbot, coming to me one morning in much excitement. "I've had such a dream!"

"Oh? What about?" I asked carelessly.

"Wly, I've dreamed a perfect stroke. There isn't one like it. It was as plain and simple as A B C. It's a masterpiece!"

He was so much in earnest that I began to be impressed. "What was it like?" I enquired.

"Well, I'll tell you." And Talbot took his hair-brush to play the dream-stroke out before me. "To get it in properly, the ball must be rising pretty well. You hold the racquet firmly, but straight up and down—like this. You hit hard, drawing the racquet from left to right as it touches the ball. That puts a screw on—see? But even without the screw the return is so swift that no one could play it."

By this time I was full of interest. "Hold on," I said, as I slipped my collar on. "We'll go and try it," and in three minutes we were down in the common-room, racquets and balls in hand. I took the balls, Talbot took his position, and I began to serve him, just the kind of thing he wanted.

He couldn't manage it at first, but at about the sixth service it came. The ball was rising a little, but not more than usual. He caught it hard and sudden, holding the racquet in a curious position which I had no time to study. The ball came to my left corner like a flash, and was gone. I knew that it had skimmed the net and touched the table, and that it was now upon the floor; but that was all. I could scarcely claim that I had seen it even.

"Got it!" I cried in admiration, and "Got it!" cried Talbot in triumph. I had never seen him so radiant, so excited; but he had good cause, for that stroke was absolutely unplayable, in my opinion. At any rate, and I am of the same opinion still. I served again and again; again and again he brought it off successfully. We began to have visions of a championship, and could scarcely consent to make a pause for breakfast.

At breakfast we told the story to our table. Fellows naturally refused to take it in, and demanded to see the thing with their own eyes. Full of confidence, we agreed, and went back to the common-room the instant the meal was over.

But, alas ! for poor Talbot and his stroke. Something had come between him and the full realization of his dream. Perhaps it was the washy tea we had been drinking, or perhaps the thick bread and butter ; things enough in themselves to spoil the beauty of any dream that ever came. Anyway, the wonderful stroke was clean gone, and it was in vain that he postured and protested. It was in vain, too, that I sent him in some of the very easiest balls that had ever run the length of a table. Most of them were shot back into the net, many flew against the walls at a tremendous pace, and the last of the series made straight for Cantling's eye. After that, amid the jeers of the spectators, Talbot threw down his racquet in disgust.

"I've lost it," he groaned. "It's gone !"

So it was ; and it has not returned up to the present moment. The worst of it was that the dream stroke ruined Talbot as a player, for he never found himself at the table after that without feeling an irresistible desire to try once more to recover it. Thus he made the wildest shots imaginable, and quite ruined a style of play which had once been very promising. Sometimes he gets in a shot which has some resemblance to the unplayable one, but it is never the real thing. For the rest, he grieves and worries about it, thinking of the great things he would have been able to do if the secret hadn't vanished in such a disappointing way. He had some faint idea, too, that he might dream the same stroke again, but it hasn't happened up to this time.

All this, however, is only the introduction to my story, put in to give you some idea of how the ping-pong craze took on at "King Alfred's." I must now move a little forward with my chronicle.

It was not to be expected that the thing would be allowed to continue. The football captain began to complain that he couldn't get the fellows to the field, they were so taken up with the new craze, and, on the other hand, the masters began to notice how the school work suffered in every direction from the same cause. There must have been a consultation between the various powers, and I have no doubt that a proper plan of campaign was drawn up.

One day we received a gentle warning that there was to be no more playing either in the studies or the common-rooms, or, indeed, anywhere upon the school premises. For a couple of days the thing was checked, and we kept quiet, but as there were no signs of danger, we soon went at it again as hard as ever. Then the masters made a sudden raid one evening just before preparation, when a score of games were in full swing. Dozens of racquets and piles of celluloid balls were ruthlessly seized, and a stern warning given for future players.

"Well," declared Cantling when we of the Fifth had found time to draw breath, "that was a real stroke, anyhow. Doesn't seem like a dream, Talbot does it?"

"Not at all," admitted Talbot, sadly.

"It's old Wickham's idea, you may depend," said Roberts. Anything keen and mean and dodgy must be Wickham. I vote we protest."

"How?" asked Smythe.

"By holding a grand tournament!"

Roberts was sure to think of something bold and desperate, and just at that time we were quite in the mood to go with him. We waited eagerly.

"It's this way," he explained. "Of course we can't expect to play much more after this, but we might as well have a real good wind-up. Then, if the head gets to know of it, let us say straight out that we did it as a protest against the confiscation of our things. That will show them just what we think of a move like Wickham's."

The idea was taken up at once, and the six of us who were present turned ourselves into a committee. It was agreed that the tournament should be held in Talbot's study, which was the largest at our disposal. The table there was only three-foot-six square, but I volunteered to add my own to it

This made an excellent board, just seven feet long. The time chosen was Saturday evening, and it was unanimously agreed that only the Fifth Form should be made aware of what was to take place.

Things went swimmingly after that. Indeed, they went so well that some of us began to have qualms. The Fifth fellows were delighted at the idea, but it soon became plain that very few of them would have the courage to take an active part in the affair. They would come to see it—that was well enough; but they steadily refused to identify themselves too closely with the actions of the committee.

We asked for entries, but on Saturday morning had only received two from outside our own body. But all the while the other outsiders were egging us on with keen delight, and declaring that a protest of this kind was not only perfectly legal and proper, but that it was also the boldest and brightest idea that had ever been heard of. This, of course, although it was very pleasant and very encouraging, made it almost impossible to draw back even if we had wished to. So, if some of us did wish to, they were obliged by the power of circumstances to go straight ahead.

One great feature of that tournament was the rules. The thing was to be done in style, if it was to be done at all; so Christopher, one of the committee, set his wits to work to frame a set of rules that would be in keeping with the rest of the proceedings. He wrote it in pencil first, and afterwards copied it out neatly on a sheet of foolscap. The fate of this last copy has yet to be described; but it was my good-fortune to get possession of the first draft for myself. Thus I am enabled to give it here in full:

KING ALFRED'S COLLEGE.

The Grand Final Cup Tournament.

Oct. 26, 1901.

A Protest against Robbery, Oppression, and Tyranny.
Referee (possibly)—the Doctor.

Mr. Wickham will be present—if he possibly can.

Owing to the Scarcity of Seats, you are
cordially invited to Stand. No extra
charge!

First Prize—A Cup. (Value Unknown.)
Presented by the Committee.

Any persons wishing to secure other Prizes are advised to apply to the Doctor (Referee). No applause! No Chairs! No noise! No Fees! As it may be easier to get in than to get out, no charge will be made for Admission. Motto:

Who would not break a Tyrant's Laws,
And strike a Ball in Freedom's Cause!

It was agreed, at Christopher's suggestion, that after the tournament the fair copy of the rules should be pinned to the public noticeboard. That would show the enemy how neatly they had been done; for while it was a great thing to play the forbidden game in this grand style, the playing would be of very little effect unless Mr. Wickham could know that it had taken place. He would understand the document well enough, but he would hardly be able to take notice of it officially. He could really prove nothing, and would only make himself absurd by a fuss.

Thus we planned and argued, little knowing how the thing would go.

The rules were secretly passed from hand to hand among the Fifth, and were received with much appreciation. They helped to increase the general interest, so that when Saturday evening came all who were in the know found themselves on the tip-toe of expectancy. By seven o'clock Talbot's study was crowded with some eighteen or twenty who had resolved to risk their safety as

spectators. The Cup—a tin one, by the way, and dear at one penny—was placed in the centre of the mantelpiece, and the rules were pinned to the wall behind it.

My table was moved in quickly and quietly; but then we were face to face with a difficulty. All the studies were small, and even Talbot's was not large enough to accommodate a seven-foot board comfortably. Making the very best of it, we had to run it straight from the window to the door, and then we found that the door wouldn't shut. Besides, the fellow playing at that end would have to stand right in the doorway, and sometimes, no doubt, outside, in the corridor itself. When we saw this we were taken aback, but Roberts soon discovered another side to it.

"That doesn't matter a bit," he declared. "In fact, it's quite an advantage. The fellow playing that end will be able to keep a keen look out, don't you see, which would be impossible if the door were shut. When he sees danger he has only to rush inside—or, for that matter, to step in quietly and coolly in the ordinary way—and we would have the table moved and the door closed in half a shake. No danger, now, of the Doctor passing by and hearing the tick-tack of the balls."

Roberts persuaded us, as he generally did. A few of the spectators looked rather uneasy, but the majority applauded the suggestion. Two minutes later the tournament had opened.

In the first round I was to play, Cantling Talbot had to meet Roberts, Christopher faced Smythe, and Stuart was to try conclusions with Erne. Stuart and Erne started, the game being for twenty-one points. There was no applause, for good and sufficient reasons; and the spectators, indeed, were packed so closely against each other all round the wall that they could not move their hands to clap. Stuart played at the door and Erne at the other end, these positions being drawn for. Time did not allow of changing ends once the game had begun.

It was a most exciting affair from the very beginning. Stuart had not only to play Erne, but also to keep a proper look-out, and to race after any ball that might fly off down the corridor. On the other hand, Erne was so tightly fixed between the table end and the wall that the advantage was not by any means all on his side. When the ball reached the floor it was very hard of recovery, and when it missed the floor it could scarcely fail to reach someone's face. This added to the interest of the proceedings, and kept things lively.

Stuart defeated Erne, and then Christopher finished up five points ahead of Smythe. Talbot was beaten by Roberts, solely because he insisted upon trying to get in two or three of his dream-strokes. During those three games there were several alarms, which gave us the opportunity of showing with what smartness we could move the table and shut the door; but there was no serious danger. The masters were apparently busy, and for the rest the Fifth Form corridor was not a public highway.

Then came the turn of Cantling and myself. I was rather glad when he drew the post of danger, and took his place by the door. He took the first service, and we were soon in the thick of a fast and close game.

I suppose the truth is that we had become careless in the look-out, and that the interest of the game had caused us all to forget its dangers. Besides, Cantling had clearly made up his mind to win, and couldn't be bothered over-much to keep an eye on the other end of the corridor. So the thing that happened was only natural, and the very thing we should have expected.

It was when we were half way through, and I was two points ahead. I had the ball in my hand, and Cantling was waiting for me to serve. He stood on the alert, his racquet resting on the table; and I was just calculating where to place the ball, when someone came suddenly and quietly behind Cantling in the doorway, and surveyed the room calmly over his shoulder.

It was Mr. Wickham!

PART II.

That situation was a very painful one. A deep silence fell as the master's eyes ranged round the room. The spectators would have liked to sink into the walls against which they leaned. Cantling, quite unconscious, waited for me to start; then he noticed the silence, turned slowly, and said, "Oh!" with a gasp.

We could see that Wickham was in his most dangerous mood. He was most dangerous when there was a sarcastic smile on his thin face, and when his manner was smooth and quiet. We knew that we were in the net, and that there was probably a bad time before us. He liked to play with his victims before despatching them.

"Don't move, any of you," he said gently; then he came into the room, walked straight up to the mantelpiece, and began to read our rules! He must have spotted them at the very beginning.

Some of us turned cold. Some felt very hot, and we all felt wild. He calmly read the thing through, while the silence was unbroken; then he turned round to me:

"Very good! Very good, indeed! Who are the originators of all this? Cantling, I see, and you, Hanley. Who are the others?"

The others owned up at once. It was useless to try an escape. He ran us over quickly, considering busily all the while.

"H'm! Eight of you. Well, I am sure you will not mind if I take a part in this tournament. I think I will give you all a final round!"

He was too pleasant for anything, and we six were not at all deceived. We guessed and feared that he had got hold of an idea that was just a little more clever and more cutting than even his ideas usually were. And so he had.

"My idea is," he said, "that each of you shall play a short game with me; for, say, six points. Each point that you fall behind will represent a thousand lines. Thus, if I beat Cantling by six to four he will write two thousand lines for me. If I beat him by four points, he will bring me four thousand."

Our feelings were mixed when we heard that. It was plain that Wickham could play, or he would never have suggested a plan like this. Four thousand lines! Well, if he had said, "Write four thousand lines each," the thing would have been bad enough, but we could have borne it. Instead of that he had arranged to make us so ridiculous into the bargain that we would be certain never to hear the end of this grand tournament of ours. It would be in our ears to the last day of our school lives.

That was just like Wickham; but there seemed to be no help for it. And in a moment he added, to clinch the thing.

"And, of course, if there is any dissatisfaction, you know what to do. You have simply to appeal to the Referee!"

Some of the spectators tittered at that. They had taken Wickham's side, like the chickenhearted lot they were. Cantling picked up his racquet, and returned to his place. Wickham took mine with a dry "Thank you, Hanley!" and prepared to serve.

There is no need to describe the events of the next fifteen minutes in full. Wickham was a good player, and naturally he was able, on an occasion like this, to do just as he pleased, for all our nerve was gone. Cantling finished up with five thousand lines to write, enough to keep him in for the whole term, not to mention the humiliation of it.

"I'm afraid you're not in form, Cantling," said Wickham. "Next, please!" And amid the grins of the spectators, Christopher slunk forward and took Cantling's place. He made two points, and was left with a thousand lines less than Cantling. Smythe came next, but made a terrible hash of the thing and did not score at all. Roberts succeeded him, and came off with three thousand. I, determined not to fall below Roberts, played up a little better, and to my delight acquired four points when the enemy had scored six.

"Come," said Mr. Wickham, "we are really improving. If you were not quite so nervous, Hanley, you would do very well!"

Nervous! The wretch! We had good cause to be nervous. Talbot came forward to take my place. "Nevertheless," continued the master, "I do not think my supremacy is in danger. I fancy I have won the cup!"

The spectators laughed outright that time. They had seen a better tournament than they had ever expected to. Little did they guess that the best was yet to come.

Talbot, although more nervous than any of us in some respects, is a fellow with a good deal of spirit, and when occasion serves can be the boldest of the bold. This evening he was to have such an opportunity as would never come again, and I have to show what use he made of it.

He took his place, and started by serving. Mr. Wickham returned with a swift shot that was very difficult to play. Talbot not only failed to play it, but allowed it to pass him, and rebound from the farther wall of the corridor. He ran to recover it.

As he picked it up he glanced, quite accidentally, down the corridor to the end; and he saw someone come through the door in the distance, and start to walk up the corridor towards him. This someone was no other than the Doctor!

If some fellows had been in Talbot's place then they would have acted very differently from what Talbot did. Some would have slipped into the room and given the news in startled tones; some would have stood stockstill and stared until the Doctor reached them. In either case, no doubt, we would all have taken the alarm. Mr. Wickham would have thrown down his racquet and become, instead of a tormentor, a judge; and the Doctor, on his arrival, would have found him rating us soundly, and distributing punishments right and left.

But Talbot managed it differently. He turned cold at first, and would have done just as other fellows; then the great idea came to him, and he seized it like a flash. Picking up the ball, he returned to his place as if he had seen nothing. Then he served, keeping his ears for the footsteps behind and his eyes for the enemy before. That is the thing he sometimes dreams of still.

The result was very simple, and quite inevitable. A moment later Mr. Wickham, playing back to Talbot and, placing the ball with great care, found that a tall figure was standing in the doorway behind his opponent. Then he realized that the Doctor was watching his shot in mingled amazement and bewilderment.

He also realized, probably, that he was lost. In matters of punishment the Head of King Alfred's was very straight and plain. He could not see the beauty of tormenting fellows, and even if he could be brought to see it, it was most unlikely that he would appreciate it or approve of it. So Mr. Wickham looked, and as he looked his face changed. He quickly laid down his racquet, and tried to smile. Seeing that smile some of us pitied him.

And the Doctor? It was no wonder that he stood and stared in bewilderment. Here was one of his assistants, deeply and earnestly engaged in a forbidden game, in a Fifth form study, and with the majority of the Fifth as delighted witnesses! It was incomprehensible! He looked from one to another; and then he saw that a fellow named Scott, who happened to be

nearest the mantelpiece, was taking down a sheet of foolscap from the wall, with the evident intention of hiding it. |

"Give me that paper!" he said calmly.

And Scott gave it. The Doctor put up his glasses and began to read. No one dared to interrupt, not even Mr. Wickham. Perhaps the poor fellow had not yet found anything to say.

"Ha! H'm!" said the Doctor, in his very best manner, after he had examined the rules. "This is interesting! And may I ask who has won the cup?"

There was a brief and terrible silence. Then the hero Talbot answered, as innocently and as gravely as possible:

"Please, sir, Mr. Wickham!"

We were breathless after that stroke. The Doctor glanced at Wickham.

"Ha! H'm!" he said again.

"I can explain all this, Doctor Holmes," stammered Wickham, again trying to smile. "I can explain it all."

"Ha! H'm!" said the Doctor, for the third time. "I thank you." Then he folded up the rules and slipped them into a book which he was carrying. After that, without another word, he turned round and stalked off down the corridor.

A moment later, Mr. Wickham went off too. He was so much engaged with his own thoughts that he could not find a word to utter. And we all realized that he had quite enough to think of.

* * * * *

Thus came to its end our Grand Final Cup Tournament. We agreed unanimously that Talbot deserved the Cup, and it was hung around his neck. Mr. Wickham had beaten all of us, but he had beaten Mr. Wickham in the last round, with the Doctor as referee!

As for Mr. Wickham, I have no doubt that he did explain the thing to the Head, and that they came to some patchwork sort of understanding about it. It couldn't well be anything more, because the ways of the two men were so utterly different. There was nothing mean or small about the Doctor, and he would find it very hard to understand his assistant's conduct. For our part, we are convinced that matters were considerably strained between them as a result, and that this was the real cause of Mr. Wickham's leaving us at the end of term. He went to another school a sadder, if not a wiser man; but perhaps it shows some good points in him that he never even mentioned the lines he had given us to write in such a clever and unfortunate way. Possibly, however, he felt that Fate had intervened on our behalf, and that we were best left alone.